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SUBJECT: GAZA-ISRAEL COMMERCIAL CROSSINGS UPDATE

Classified By: DCM Gene A. Cretz, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This cable was cleared by Consulate General Jerusalem.

¶1. (C) Summary: The crossings between Gaza and Israel are important commercial ports. The GOI is devoting significant resources to upgrade and expand several crossings, including Erez, Kerem Shalom and Tarqumiya. The GOI has also instituted a risk management scheme in order to promote security and accelerate the processing of cargoes exported into Israel. The flow of Palestinian goods from Gaza through Karni/al-Mintar crossing, however, remains severely restricted. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA), brokered in November 2005, calls for the opening and continuous operation of a number of crossing points that serve as a lifeline into Gaza for food and humanitarian supplies and as portals for economic growth through which agricultural produce and other Gazan exports can get to market. Due to the serious security situation, however, the GOI has frequently closed the crossings. In fact, Karni/al-Mintar, the most important commercial crossing, has been closed for much of the year. The following is an update on the various crossing points.

KARNI/AL-MINTAR CROSSING

¶3. (C) Karni/al-Mintar is the main crossing for the passage of commercial goods between Israel and Gaza. Karni operates under a &back-to-back& system whereby Israeli and Palestinians trucks remain on their respective sides of the crossing and goods pass between them through a secured loading/unloading station, or &cell,& within the crossing's barrier wall. Karni has 32 stations where goods can be loaded/unloaded. Due to security threats, the crossing has been open only 47 percent of the time in 2006. From January 1 until May 8, a total of 18,473 truckloads were imported and 1,767 truckloads were exported through Karni. (Note: According to OCHA, a minimum of 25 truckloads of wheat flour, 5.6 truckloads of sugar, 3.6 truckloads of rice, and 2.2 truckloads of cooking oil must be imported daily to meet basic consumption needs in Gaza. End note.) Since its reopening on March 21, closures have become less frequent and imports have averaged over 200 truckloads per day, including aggregates, when the crossing is open. (Note: Karni has been open 73 percent of the time since the March 29 Knesset elections. End note.) Based on security concerns and a policy of giving priority to humanitarian imports into Gaza, the GOI has severely limited exports leaving Gaza. (Comment: USAID believes that scanners currently deployed at Karni working in two shifts could easily handle 150 export trucks, as outlined in the Agreement on Movement and Access. End comment.) Agricultural products, for example, are allowed to be exported out of Gaza through only a single cell. (Note: Fuel transfers at Karni can be done by means of a pipe across the green line. Flour and grain can also be transferred via pipe. End note.)

¶4. (C) According to Israeli Airports Authority (IAA) Deputy Director General Yoram Shapira (IAA controls border crossings), Karni uses a risk management system for checking exports. All cargo from Gaza is offloaded into a lion-cage type device or transit cell that allows the cargo to enter and then closes. It is then sniffed by dogs and given an initial inspection. Cargo can also go through a palette scanner. Depending on the security status of a particular cargo, the general security situation, the type of cargo, the availability of Israeli trucks, and the requirement for additional scanning, cargo will be sent for additional inspection. For example, a risk management percentage of cargo (generally 5-10 percent) from loaded trucks can be taken off and scanned or cargo can be 100 percent scanned by the mobile scanner. Suspect cargoes are removed and taken through a secondary scanning process. Currently, agricultural produce is removed from the exchange cell by forklift and then placed on inspection tables that are located in the scanner's purpose-built installation compound. A USAID-funded scanner is fully operational within the existing site and is scanning cargoes of agricultural products being exported out of Gaza. (Note: United State Security Coordinator team and USAID are working on developing a more efficient risk management system. End note.)

15. (C) Shapira told econoffs that the GOI has invested millions of dollars in refurbishing Karni, including the purchase and installation of cameras, lighting, infrastructure and other equipment. Shapira said there are three outstanding issues for the IAA at Karni. He said that the IAA needs two more high-penetration scanners for palettes to replace eight old screeners that they are currently using.

Such a switch would double or triple the speed of the quantity of cargo they could check, thereby accelerating operations. Shapira also said that the main road to Karni needs to be paved, but there is disagreement within the Israeli government over who should pay for road. The last outstanding issue is the need to obtain land to build a parking lot.

KEREM SHALOM

16. (C) Kerem Shalom first served as a crossing for the Israeli military. With the GOI's disengagement from Gaza, Kerem Shalom was redesigned to serve as an international crossing for goods coming from Egypt and destined for the Gaza Strip, in one direction only. Since March 22, Kerem Shalom has also processed humanitarian assistance from Egypt.

Since that time, some 15-20 truckloads per day of humanitarian supplies from Egypt have entered Gaza at Kerem Shalom. There are days when there is no cargo coming into Gaza from Egypt, and the crossing is not used. GOI officials would also like to use Kerem Shalom for the importation of goods from Israel to Gaza. A USAID-funded, fully-operational scanner is on site, but not yet in use.

17. (C) According to Israel Airport Authority officials, the GOI has designated an as-yet undeveloped area within the crossing where goods from Gaza could be unloaded prior to being transferred to Israeli trucks. Palette scanners would be used to check the cargo. With the current configuration, the crossing cannot simultaneously process both Egyptian traffic and Gaza export cargo and thus would have to be closed to all traffic from Egypt during the inspection and transfer of Gaza cargo. The maximum amount of outbound Gaza cargo that could be handled under this regime is 30-35 shipments a day, according to GOI IAA officials.

EREZ

18. (C) Erez is the only crossing in use for general pedestrian traffic between Gaza and Israel. Since March 12 it has been closed to Palestinian workers. (Note: According to sources at COGAT, MOD Peretz is likely to lift the ban in the near future. In February, around 3,700 workers had been crossing daily. End note.) However, VIPs, families of prisoners in Israeli jails, and humanitarian cases may still use the crossing. Erez terminal manager Shlomo Saban told econoff that an average of two ambulances cross every day into Israel. Erez is also designed for exports of goods into Israel, primarily, although not exclusively, from the Erez industrial zone, a secured area in Gaza formerly administered by the GOI but largely inactive since the disengagement. According to General Bazelel Traiber, the MOD official in charge of the Erez crossing, 300 plus trucks/day can be processed when the vehicle scanners are in place. Between 20-40 can be processed each day without scanners.

19. (C) Although open 24 hours, the peak times for pedestrian traffic are 0100 hours to 0800 hours. Pedestrians go through a metal detector and a scanner that produces a 3-d hologram image. Each scanner system is connected to multiple operators. Males and females go through separate lanes, so that only someone of the same gender scans a particular pedestrian. Traiber said that in other countries, such as Mexico and Singapore, where this same scanner system is in operation, passengers are given the option of a strip search rather than going through the scanner. Traiber said that security considerations preclude giving people that option here.

110. (C) The GOI is building a huge, air-conditioned terminal to handle the pedestrian traffic at the cost of NIS 130 million (approximately USD 28 million). The completed terminal will be equipped so that pedestrians can go through three different checks) a metal detector, a hologram scanner, and a check of biometric indices. Traiber said that a lack of funding has forced the GOI to halt construction on all facilities at Erez, except for the pedestrian terminal. Saban said that construction on the terminal should be completed by May or June with a formal opening in July or August. Currently 60 employees work at Erez, 20 of which are security guards from the private security firm, Sheleg Levan.

After the new terminal opens, there will be 200 employees at Erez. General Traiber said that there also have been discussions regarding construction of a train station that

would connect Erez to Ashdod.

SUFA

¶11. (C) Sufa is the main terminal for aggregates into Gaza. Israeli trucks enter Gaza every other day to drop aggregate in a large open lot just over the Green Line. Palestinian trucks are allowed into the open lot the following day to load aggregate for distribution within Gaza. Sufa has also been used on a limited basis as a transit point for basic food commodities shipments when Karni/al-Mintar has been closed for extensive periods. In April 2006, it was used for importing humanitarian supplies into Gaza, including 85 truckloads of wheat flour from the World Food Program and 11 trucks containing 400 tons of humanitarian assistance from Jordan's King Abdullah. Over a two-day period April 16-17, 3,000 tons of wheat was imported into Gaza through Sufa.

NAHAL OZ

¶12. (U) Nahal Oz is used solely for the importation of petroleum products into Gaza. Israeli trucks pump the fuel into underground holding tanks at the crossing. The fuel is then transferred via a cross border pipe.

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JONES